

The Minister and the Bailiff: A Study of Presbyterian Clergy in the Northern Highlands During The Clearances

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“Am ministeir ’s am baillidh,
Am baillidh ’s am ministeir,
Ged’s truagh rinn orm am baillidh,
’Se sharaich mi ’m ministeir—
Am ministeir ’s am baillidh.

Tha’n righ a’tighinn do’n duthaich,
’S mo dhurachdsa gun tigeadh e,
’S an ceann a thoirt de’n baillidh,
’S am bas a thoirt do’n ministeir—
Am ministeir ’s am baillidh.

(The minister and the bailiff,
The bailiff and the minister,
Although the bailiff was hard on me,
It is the minister who harassed me—
The minister and the bailiff.

The king is coming to the country,
It is my wish that he should come,
And take the head off the bailiff,
And give death to the minister—
The minister and the bailiff.)”

Traditional song

The minister and the bailiff, or factor, were representatives of two of the most important institutions in the nineteenth-century Highlands, namely, the church and estates. The estates governed the economics of Highland livelihood and the church directed Highland spiritual life. Highland culture had to evolve according to the directives of both these institutions. During the Clearances the clergy have, rightly or wrongly, earned a great deal of popular ill-repute despite a paucity of historical inquiry into their actions and attitudes.¹ This study is directed toward a greater

¹ The rôle of the Highland clergy during the Clearances has been addressed as part of a larger study of the attitudes of the Presbyterian church toward social questions in, Donald Smith, *Passive Obedience and Prophetic Protest* (New York, 1987).

understanding of the rôle played by ministers of the northern Highlands during the Clearances of the early nineteenth century and the historical background which may have influenced their decisions.

Most information pertains to Sutherland, although some reference is made to neighbouring Ross-shire and to the island of Skye. Before proceeding directly to the ministers, some background information will be dealt with. This includes early traditions associated with ministers, the development of the Moderate and Evangelical parties within the Church of Scotland and some evaluation of the clergy during the 1745 Rebellion. This information should help in understanding the actions of some of the clergy during the Clearances as well as providing background to the popular perception of their actions during the Clearances and in later years. The ministers themselves may be divided into four categories: those who were anti-clearance; those whose actions were neither wholly for or against the Clearances; those who were in support of estate plans; and finally a few who supported the need for Clearances but regretted the suffering of their fellow Highlanders. Perhaps the widest conclusion which may be drawn from all of this is that the attitudes and actions of the ministers were just as diverse as the attitudes and actions of their congregations.

Ministers have borne the brunt of verbal attack for centuries. As early as the eighteenth century the famous Sutherland poet Rob Donn (1715-1758) turned his finely sharpened wit against the ministry. His humorous denunciation is often taken as an example of all that was wrong with Highland clergy.

“Falbh ’n an cuideachd ’s nan comhradh,
Is gheibh thu moran do’n phac ud,
’Dheanadh ceannaiche no seoldair,
’Dheanadh drobhair no factoir,
’Dheanadh tuathanach sunndach,
’Dheanadh stiubhard no-chaitheach,
’S mach o’n cheaird air ’n do mhionnaich iad
Tha na h’uile ni gas’d ac’.²

(Go in their company and conversation
And you’ll find most of the pack of them,
Fit for pedlars or sailors
Fit for drovers or factors
Fit for happy farmers
Fit for stewards, not wasteful
Their sworn calling excepted,
Fit for everything excellent.)”

² J. C. Mackay, “Social Life in the Highlands”, *Transactions of the Glasgow Gaelic Society*, i, 189.

Despite Rob Donn's sarcasm in this verse, it should be noted that his relations with the clergy were not always hostile. For example, the Rev. Murdo Macdonald of Durness held a high place in Rob Donn's esteem and his elegy is considered by some as Rob Donn's greatest poem.³ The poet appreciated the minister's diligence in stern religious instruction while maintaining a high regard for native poetry and song.

"The one to compare with you
For voice and ear
Has never been seen nor heard of
And in my opinion he will not be heard of.
Although rich in piety
You showed appreciation for every talent,
And well did you understand the songs
And the one who composed the verses."

A similar combination of compassion and compunction was also noted and appreciated by Rob Donn.

"You were gentle to those in need,
You were generous with reasonable people,
You were shrewd of aspect, hard
As stone towards the miscreant.
You were bountiful in giving,
You were diligent preacher,
You gave timely advice
And in the end your hostility turned to love."

In view of this, perhaps Rob Donn's denunciation, quoted earlier, belongs more properly to the realm of satire rather than as a definitive statement against the clergy. It is true that neighbouring ministers with whom relations were not so cordial bore the brunt of his reproof, but whether the ill-feeling was caused by personality or ill-religion can only be guessed at.⁴

Rob Donn was not the only poet to lampoon the clergy. The difficulties in providing Gaelic speaking ministers sometimes resulted in the settlement of ministers who lacked fluency. The problems experienced by the Rev. John MacGregor Souter of Diurinish, in Skye, provided a foil for the well known wit Gillesbeag Aotrom, Lively Archibald.

"Ministeir, baillidh,
Moderator no cleireach.
Chan'eil sgoilear is aird' na thu,
An drasda an Duneidean.

³ I. Grimble, *The World of Rob Donn* (Edinburgh, 1980), 35.

⁴ H. Morrison, *The Songs and Poems of Rob Donn*, (Edinburgh, 1899), xlv-xlvi.

Nuair a theid thu 'na chubaid,
Ni thu urnuigh bhois gle mhath,
Cuid na Beurla 's na Gailig,
Cuid na Laidin 's na Greugeis
'Sa chuid nach tuig each dhi.⁵

(Minister, bailiff,
Moderator or clerk.

There is no better scholar than you
Now in Edinburgh.

When you will go to the pulpit
You will make a prayer that would be very good,
Part in English, and in Gaelic
Part in Latin, and in Greek,
And parts that no-one could understand.)''

The interesting question raised by examples such as the preceding is not so much whether they truly portray the character of the unfortunate minister, but rather how far, if at all, such verses discredited the clergy in general. Both examples have been used by historians as illustrations of the degeneracy of Highland clergy and have been contrasted with the dedication, devotion and godliness of the Evangelical ministers who later became so powerful in the Highlands. The personal degeneration and complete disregard of office by the Moderate clergy has become a platitude in Evangelical historiography.⁶ The accuracy, or otherwise, of these statements may give some clue to the importance of native verse in the popularity of the Evangelicals.

The development of the Moderate and Evangelical parties has a long history which has been dealt with by numerous writers.⁷ With regard to the Highlands, and generally throughout Scotland, the doctrines of the Moderates were partly based upon the perceived necessity of overcoming the influence of Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism.⁸ This involved the dual criteria of maintaining the establishment principle, making the Church of Scotland a wing of the state and secondly of ensuring discipline and order within the church. The consequences of the Moderates' position and the patronage dispute became clear with the formation of the Free Church, but the indirect effects of their position had peculiar repercussions in the Highlands.

⁵ MacCowan, *The Men of Skye* (Glasgow, 1902), 3.

⁶ Cf. K. Macdonald, *Social and Religious Life in the Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1902) especially his chapter "The Moderates".

⁷ Cf. A. C. Cheyne, *The Transforming of the Kirk* (Edinburgh, 1983); Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1973).

⁸ Durkacz, *The Decline of the Celtic Languages* (Edinburgh, 1983), 97.

First of all, it has been claimed that because of political reaction after the French Revolution, Moderates were very wary of missionary groups whose funds could be applied to politics.⁹ Consequently, by avoiding such organizations the popular missionary activity within the Highlands was left to the Evangelicals.¹⁰ The second aspect was that the Moderates supported the view that religious principles were inextricable from society and culture, or more specifically anglicized society and culture, with the result that the main medium for popular preaching, Gaelic, was left to the Evangelicals as was missionary activity.¹¹

However much the doctrinal practices of the Moderates may have restricted their success in the nineteenth century, it should be recalled that progress had been made in an earlier period and also that Evangelical attacks, by men such as Hugh Miller, were often attacks on the personal qualities, or rather the lack thereof, of the Moderate ministers.¹² The question, then, is the extent to which the Moderates were guilty of the vice and irresponsibility of which they were accused.

The question has been investigated by G. E. MacDermid who concluded that, with the exception of a few, the Moderates did not abuse their positions, and that increased responsibilities made their duties much harder to fulfil.

“... the evidence is not resounding that ministers widely shirked their responsibilities. It is true that there was a general observable erosion of former standards in this regard, and it is likely that a few ministers badly neglected their duties. On the whole, however, they seem to have done tolerably well. As much as anything else, factors beyond their control reduced the effectiveness of their work. For one thing, the proportion of ministers to parishioners decreased as the population grew. . . .”¹³

Even if the performance of duty was not suspect, the quality of the performance must still be taken into account. Fortunately records exist by which this consideration may be measured. These are the records of church courts where prospective ministers underwent an examination of trial preaching. According to MacDermid's study

⁹ Buchanan, *Ten Years Conflict*, 169.

¹⁰ Durkacz, *Decline*, 100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹² For example, Kenneth Macdonald's description of a Moderate minister: "He was frequently the best dancer in the parish, and as good a drinker of toddy as the laird." K. Macdonald, *Social and Religious Life*, 79.

¹³ G. E. MacDermid, "The Religious and Ecclesiastical Life of the Northwest Highlands, 1750-1843. The background of the Presbyterian Emigrants to Cape Breton, Nova Scotia" (Aberdeen, Ph.D. thesis, 1967), 126-35.

there was no difference in the choice of texts between Evangelicals and Moderates, as they both tended to draw their sermons from the same scriptural texts.¹⁴ The difference, then, was not so much in doctrine but in interpretation and zeal.

“And one can imagine that the moderates resented not only the immense popularity which the Evangelicals enjoyed, but also the fact that the latter were reaping a harvest which they, the moderates, had, to some extent, sown. . . . But their failure was largely due to their lack of what the Evangelicals peculiarly possessed, namely, a missionary mentality and a missionary zeal.”¹⁵

Perhaps the missionary mentality which characterized the zealous efforts at converting their congregations was the primary difference between Moderates and the Evangelicals. The new generation of ministers took missionary work very seriously. John MacDonald of Ferintosh earned the label, the Apostle of the North, for his zealous commitment which was instrumental in revivals throughout Ross-shire. He learned Irish to preach in Ireland and had a special interest in St Kilda.¹⁶ Perhaps the most important recognition of Evangelical efforts in the Highlands was when Maighstir Ruairidh, Roderick MacLeod, of Snizort in Skye became the moderator of the Free Church’s General Assembly in 1863.¹⁷

The anomaly raised by a study of the ministers is that despite the immense popularity of the Evangelicals and the very strong support of the Free Church in 1843, there existed a tradition that the clergy abandoned their congregations to the dictates of landlord policy during the Clearances. As late as the Land Wars of the 1880s the clergy were still held in popular ill-repute as in Mairi Mhor nan Oran’s famous work, *Clach Ard Uige*.

“Tha luchd teagaisg cho beag curaim,
Faicinn caradh mo luchd duthcha;
'S iad cho balbh air anns a' chubaid,
'S ged bu bhruidean bhiodh 'gan eisdeach.

(Preachers care so little
seeing the condition of my countrymen,
so dumb about it in the pulpit
as if their audience were brute beasts.)”¹⁸

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁶ *Disruption Worthies of the Highlands*, ed. A. Duff (Edinburgh, 1877), 20-21.

¹⁷ D. Beaton, *Noted Ministers of the Northern Highlands* (Inverness, 1929), 191.

¹⁸ S. MacLean, “The Poetry of the Clearances”, *Ris a' Bhruthaich* (Stornoway, 1985), 72.

The feeling of abandonment by those whose education and position might have helped, and the reduction of humanity to the level of animals is not much different from the feelings expressed by Donald Macleod of Strathnaver forty years earlier.

“They were always employed to explain and interpret to the assembled people the orders and designs of the factors; and they did not spare their college paint on these occasions. Black was white, or white black as it answered their purpose in discharging what they called their duty. They did not scruple to introduce the name of the deity; representing Him as the author and abettor of all the foul and cruel proceedings carried on; and they had another useful being ready to seize every soul who might feel an inclination to revolt.”¹⁹

Macleod pointed out that the clergy considered that the Clearances were punishment for supposed wickedness.

The clergy, indeed, in their sermons, maintained that the whole [Clearances] was a merciful interposition of Providence to bring them to their repentance, rather than to send them all to hell, as they so richly deserved.”²⁰

Just how receptive the Highlanders were to this type of coercion is very hard to measure, but Mairi Mhor nan Oran certainly suggests that such views were accepted in her comment on religious obsession.

“Tha’n sluagh air fas cho iongantach
’S gur cruithneachd leotha bron.

(The people have grown so strange
that sorrow is wheat to them.)”²¹

Emigration sermons provide additional evidence of the use of religion.

At the close of the eighteenth century the poet Donald Matheson of Kildonan was able to see a biblical precedent in the flight of the Hebrews from Egypt and as late as the 1850s similar themes were being discussed.²² During a sermon on a prospective emigration to Australia, the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles used Genesis 42, 1-2 to encourage his congregation.

“Now when Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt, Jacob said unto his sons, Why do ye look one upon the other? And he

¹⁹ D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories in A History of the Highland Clearances*, ed. A. MacKenzie (Inverness, 1883), 30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹ S. MacLean, “Poetry of the Clearances”, 73.

²² M. MacDonnell, *The Emigrant Experience* (Toronto, 1982), 19-26.

said, Behold, I have heard that there is corn in Egypt: get you down thither.”²³

It is not surprising that a religious population would interpret events in a religious manner, but it is surprising that they should do so when events were so strongly against their traditions and interests.

Some authors have held religion to be a check against violence and opposition to the Clearances which assumed more importance as restraining notions of clan loyalty were lost with time.

“Even as late as the eighties of the last century the lingering traces of this tradition [i.e. clan loyalty] were manifesting themselves in the absurd tendency to blame the factor more than the landlord. But the religious factor was of far more consequence in the weakening of popular resistance, and it increased as the Clearances progressed. Thus the fact that there were so many more examples of resistance to Clearances in the period between 1780 and 1820 than in the period 1820 to 1870 is partly accounted for by the spreading and deepening of the religious revival after 1820.”²⁴

There may be some truth in this view, but the amount of resistance is dependent upon the number of Clearances, and in Sutherland, for example, the large-scale removals were complete by 1821.²⁵ Consequently support based upon the number of instances of resistance must be carefully considered. Perhaps another clue is simply that the diversity of the Highland population meant that the response to a clearance was diverse also. Many did accept the changes imposed, but some did not. The Rev. Donald Sage, a contemporary of Donald MacLeod, who was cleared from Achness provides another viewpoint.

“The truly pious acknowledged the mighty hand of God in the matter. In their prayers and religious conferences not a solitary expression could be heard indicative of anger or vindictiveness, but in the sight of God they humbled themselves and received the chastisement at His hand. Those, however, who were strangers to such exalted and ennobling impressions of the gospel breathed deep and muttered curses on the heads of those who subjected them to such treatment. The more reckless portion of them fully realized the character of the impenitent in all ages, and indulged in the most culpable of excesses, even

²³ Aberdeen University Archives, The Thomson Collection, “Che Till Ma Tuille”, A Sermon on Emigration from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to Australia by the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles, London, 1852.

²⁴ S. MacLean, “Poetry of the Clearances”, 49.

²⁵ Cf., E. Richards, *The Highland Clearances*, i, 284.

while this divine punishment was suspended over them. These last, however, were very few in number—not more than a dozen.”²⁶

Such were the attitudes of the best remembered of the ministers during the Clearances. No-one was more concerned for the welfare of his people than he, but the doctrine held by both his congregation and himself held fast to passivity.

Sage was not blind to the abuses of some of his colleagues. His memoirs, published after his death, contain many references to the good as well as the bad qualities of his fellow ministers. Sage, unlike MacLeod, did not accuse the clergy of flagrant disregard for the welfare of their congregations but presents a picture of country gentlemen fulfilling their duties with neither complete disregard nor zealous commitment.

On the Rev. Downie of Lochalsh, Sage commented: “a man of wealth and gentlemanly manners, a princely landlord, an extensive sheep farmer, a good shot, but a wretched preacher”.²⁷ Sage’s indictment of the Rev. John Cameron of Halkirk was even less complimentary: “He usually read his English sermons. The manuscripts were at least forty years old, the crude lucubrations of his younger years, whilst the deep yellow hue of the leaves, and their tattered and rounded corners, bore ocular testimony to their antiquity”.²⁸ It appears that the vituperation of the Moderates by the Evangelicals was sometimes justified and if so, perhaps the inattention of the Established Church was an important factor in the development of evangelical movements.

In contrast to Sage, Donald MacLeod made accusations of total duplicity on the part of some ministers. When she toured her estate in 1830, the Duchess of Sutherland relied on translations provided by her factors and ministers when communicating with her tenantry. Shocked by the level of destitution, she was repeatedly assured of the people’s comfort by her companions. The duchess was especially affected by the wretched housing which had been thrown up by the evicted tenants upon their new allotments, and turning to one of her companions, the parish minister, she asked, “Is it possible that there are people living in yonder places?”—“O yes, my lady,” was the reply. “And can you tell me if they are in any way comfortable?” “Quite comfortable, my lady.” To this conversation Donald MacLeod added:

“I can declare that at the very moment this reverend gentleman

²⁶ D. Sage, *Memorabilia Domestica* (Edinburgh, 1889), 215.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

uttered these words, he was fully aware of the horrors of the situation.”²⁹

It is unfortunate that MacLeod did not name the particular minister, as he did many others. In general, MacLeod thought that the Clearances were accepted by the ministers for at least four reasons.³⁰ Their lands were enclosed, their tillage was extended, they often received new manses and offices and finally, roads were built for their accommodation; but all of these features, however, could be said of any of the farming class who became involved in an improvement system. These reasons do not suggest that the offending ministers got special treatment, but the ministers did adopt a life-style different from that of the majority of their congregations.

MacLeod saved his infrequent praise for the Rev. Alexander Sage of Kildonan, Donald Sage’s father.

“This reverend gentleman had dissented from his brethren, and, to the best of his power, opposed their proceedings; hence he was persecuted and despised by them and the factors, and treated with marked disrespect. After the burning out, having lost his pious elders and attached congregation, he went about mourning till his demise, which happened not long after. His son had been appointed by the people to a chapel of ease, parish of Farr, and paid by them; but, when the expulsion took place, he removed to Aberdeen, and afterwards to Ross-shire. On account of his father’s integrity he could not expect a kirk in Sutherland.”³¹

Donald Sage only refers in passing to the events and accusations of rioting in protest to the Clearances recounted by MacLeod, but the reference strongly suggests that MacLeod was accurate.³²

The basic problem of reconciling the odious reputation of the clergy with the popularity of the Evangelical preachers and the prominent position of religion in general cannot be accomplished easily. All that was bad cannot be blamed upon the Moderates and, according to MacLeod, only Alexander Sage opposed the landlords. The clergy’s position was a difficult one. On the one hand, lawful estate plans could deprive him of his congregation, if not his church and manse and, on the other hand, there was very little scope for resistance. For example, in Harris the Rev. Alexander MacLeod reproached both the factor and his landlord

²⁹ D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

³² D. Sage, *Memorabilia*, 186, “Sellar laboured hard to include my father in the criminality of the proceedings, but he utterly failed.”

for the conversion to sheep, and ended up in a libel suit pursued by the factor.³³

Ministers not active in opposition nor in support of estate plans might find their very duties put them in a bad light. Very often they acted as intermediaries between English-speaking estate managers and Gaelic speaking tenants.³⁴ As noted earlier, MacLeod accused them of misleading the people. "Black was white or white black as it answered their purpose", and of using their position to enforce quiescence, "they had another useful being ready to seize every soul who might feel an inclination to revolt". MacLeod's damning testimony was recorded twenty to thirty years after the large scale evictions in Sutherland. However, his accusations are supported by evidence contained in Sutherland estate records. In light of this new evidence, MacLeod's account is not only verified but the *Sutherland Papers* provide important clues to the extreme odium in which ministers were held during the period of the Clearances.

In June 1815, Sutherland of *The Star*, a London newspaper, contacted a number of ministers in Sutherland concerning a report that they had attempted to frustrate the hope of government assistance for emigration to some of the removed tenants by discrediting their character. Sutherland's brother, resident in Sutherland, reported that the story was a popular one. Sutherland of *The Star* then contacted a family acquaintance, the Rev. Dr John Bethune of Dornoch, about the story.

"It was at the time confidently spoken of here that the factors of Sutherland had removed these tenants under Lady Stafford's directions, they were at the same time doing all they could to prevent their emigration, even under the protection which it was then hoped My Lord Selkirk would procure for them from the government, but which eventually failed. That with a view to effect this, and to discredit the general character given to these men in the Star Paper, of which I aver myself to have been the author (indeed I never concealed myself from being so, for the editor had my address) the local agents proposed to the clergy to draw up a paper, in the nature of a *Certificate* under their hands, purporting, 'That the Highlanders were an idle disorderly set of people, totally unworthy of protection' which document was sent to My Lady Stafford."³⁵

Sutherland also points out that not only was Bethune said to be in

³³ SRO, Seaforth Muniments, GD95/13/105.

³⁴ Francis Sutherland's defence of the Sutherland estate *Morning Chronicle*, 3 September 1819, mentions that the ministers were employed to instruct the people about pending evictions.

³⁵ N.L.S., Dep. 313/1016, A. Sutherland to Rev. Dr Bethune, 20 June 1815.

support of the certificate but that of all the ministers in Sutherland only two, Alexander Sage and William Keith, dissented.

“*Your* name was mentioned, as one of the subscribers; and indeed the only exceptions to the transactions of the whole body were, Mr Keith and Mr Sage. I was not then, nor for three months thereafter in communication with my brother. When I was however, I put a question to him on this point—his reply to it was that the people had such a report among them, but that he could of his own knowledge, say nothing of it.”

Bethune denied the existence of such a certificate but in general, if not on specifics, Sutherland’s letter supports Donald MacLeod’s accusations in a number of ways. First, the clergy were supportive of estate plans, secondly emigration was actively discouraged, and Alexander Sage (although not alone according to Sutherland) had the integrity to stand behind his congregation. If the story was really a popular one then it proves strong evidence of a widespread feeling against the ministers. Such a feeling, whether justified or not, would be a possible source of the odious reputation gained by the ministers of Sutherland. Donald MacLeod had another connection with the events described by Alexander Sutherland and this is through William Chisholm of Badinloskin.

When William Chisholm’s village was cleared, it was claimed that a number of aged and infirm had been put out of their homes and their houses destroyed. Chisholm’s house was set on fire with his bed-ridden mother-in-law still inside. MacLeod claimed to have been an eye-witness and attempted to prevent Patrick Sellar from evicting the old woman.

“On his arrival I told him of the poor old woman being in a condition unfit for removal. He replied, ‘Damn her, the old witch, she has lived too long; let her burn.’ Fire was immediately set to the house, and the blankets in which she was carried were in flames before she could be got out.”³⁶

Patrick Sellar was put on trial for the alleged outrages and, as is well known, was exonerated. This was partly owing to weakness of testimony from witnesses against Sellar. However, the strength of testimony by a witness to some extent depends upon the character of the witness and in addition to his other inquiries, Sutherland accused the Rev. David MacKenzie of Farr of deliberately destroying a certificate of character he had previously issued to William Chisholm.³⁷

³⁶ D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 16-17.

³⁷ N.L.S., Dep. 313/1016, A. Sutherland to David MacKenzie, Farr, 16 June, 1815.

MacKenzie, like Bethune, denied the existence of a certificate describing the Highlanders as "an idle disorderly set of people", but did not deny destroying Chisholm's certificate. MacKenzie claimed that the certificate had been fraudulently obtained and therefore he tore it from the petition by Chisholm against Sellar.³⁸ How much the certificate could have altered the subsequent trial cannot be known, but in view of the emphasis placed on the characters of witnesses, it could well have strengthened the case against Sellar.³⁹

Sutherland also contacted the Rev. Walter Ross of Clyne, accusing him of deliberate dishonesty and trickery in obtaining the signatures of the congregation for a document written to discredit accounts of the Clearances which had reached the press.

"... with reference to the removals of the Clyne Men in 1813, you were charged with and lent yourself to the duty of procuring them to affix their signatures to a document framed in the nature of a certificate, that, when a discussion arose on the state of the County, in the Star Newspaper (in which I bore a humble part) as to the condition of the Clyne and Kildonan men; that these changes were for, 'their own good and at their request'—you procured some to sign it by reading only partial and garbled extracts—but when, as an honest man, the same paper was given to Mr Sage, he read the whole to the men, who, on such reading refused to sign it."⁴⁰

Unfortunately Ross's reply has not been found so there is no evidence that the accusations were true or false. However, if Sutherland's accusations were as widely held as he claimed their existence could be a source of the odium the ministers had incurred. The details need not be accurate, if the generalities were believed.

However, the basic problem of understanding the strength of religion during a period when many of the ministers were seen to be acting against the welfare of the people is unsolved. Perhaps most ministers were not as dishonest as those Sutherland contacted, or maybe the people simply had no-one else besides the minister to turn to in their distress.

"Most important of all, however, many northwest Highland people must have sensed that ministers generally stood as a

³⁸ N.L.S., Dep. 313/1016, D. MacKenzie to A. Sutherland, 1815.

³⁹ For an account sympathetic to the crofters, see Ian Grimble, *The Trial of Patrick Sellar* (London, 1962), and for the case in favour of Sellar see Thomas Sellar, *The Sutherland Evictions of 1814* (London, 1883).

⁴⁰ N.L.S., Dep. 313/1016, A. Sutherland to W. Ross, 16 June 1815.

bulwark against extreme oppression, and that, through them, the church sought to plead the case of the dispossessed.”⁴¹

Evaluation of this question rests on how far, if at all, ministers might “plead the case of the dispossessed”.

There were a few ministers who would not condone the Clearances, although few of them were vocal. In the *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, the minister of Nigg wrote that “improvements may be carried on, at an expense of morals and human comfort which no pecuniary advantage can counterbalance”,⁴² but he was an exception. Most ministers confined their remarks to geology, topography and antiquities.

Another minister who used the *New Statistical Account* to decry the Clearances was the Rev. David Carment of Rosskeen. In his account, he wrote:

“... the depopulation of the country by large farmers is a serious evil, and is likely to bring along with it consequences which the landed interest seem not to have contemplated . . . decrease in morality . . . hatred of landlords . . . to which we look forward with fearful anticipation, it will, we fear, be found, that an error has been committed by grasping too much, at the risk of sooner or later losing all.”⁴³

Carment’s ministry had an additional distinction:

“In 1822 the system of ‘The Men’ was dominant in Eastern Ross. Mr Carment’s straight forwardness and independence of style did not suit them, and he and they soon came to an open rupture. Such an event in normal circumstances was fatal to a minister’s influence. The people left him and followed ‘The Men’. In Mr Carment’s case however, this result was for the first time reversed. The people left ‘The Men’ and followed the minister.”⁴⁴

Carment appears to have been one of the few ministers who achieved high popularity and had not condoned the Clearances. However, there is no evidence that he preached resistance and it would be very unlikely that he would have. Yet he had the integrity to publish his views even though they indicted his superiors.

There are signs, however, that some ministers may have been privately anti-Clearance in spite of their public appearance. In 1844, one R. Munro wrote a letter to the Rev. James Campbell of Kildonan

⁴¹ G. E. MacDermid, *Religious and Ecclesiastical Life*, 148.

⁴² *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Ross and Cromarty, parish of Nigg, 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁴⁴ *Disruption Worthies*, 34.

which was definitely anti-Clearance, and he was on familiar enough terms to confide his sentiments to Campbell. Munro wrote:

“I am going to emigrate . . . my situation here is a precarious one, a nominee Elder in the church, a wood Forester, a ground officer obliged to act in connection with an oppressing and quirky factor . . . and more and more he urges me to act as Ground Officer . . . otherwise he will reduce my salary. . . . I do not like to see myself ejecting the poor bodies, and Rose is a man of no feeling.”⁴⁵

It is impossible to judge what the private feelings of a minister were. The letter to James Campbell only hints at Campbell’s sentiments, and yet it suggests anti-Clearance attitudes beyond what might otherwise be expected.

The Rev. David MacKenzie of Farr, who destroyed William Chisholm’s certificate, seems to have been against the Clearances but was not an active opponent. His solitary recorded act of opposition was his refusal to concur with the clearance of his parish.

“After labouring at Achness for three years, he was translated to the Parish church of Farr. He was there but a few years when the scheme for clearing Strathnaver, and other places, was concocted. Mr MacKenzie was applied to for his concurrence so as to give, it is supposed, a show of expediency to the measure, but this he absolutely refused to do.”⁴⁶

MacKenzie’s written refusal has been described as “the most comprehensive rejection of the assumption of the Sutherland policy uttered during these years”.⁴⁷ He pointed out that the already overpopulated coastal areas would not be improved by further congestion. He argued that the people could not readily turn to fishing without proper equipment or training. He claimed the allotments were small and the land too poor while indigence and poverty were just as prevalent on the coast as on the interior.

However, despite all these denunciations of the Clearance system, MacKenzie had previously worked with estate management to arrange the new allotments for the removed tenantry.

“Witness: Rev. David M’Kenzie, minister of Farr, identified the notice given to the tenants in Strathnaver at the set in December, 1813, founded on the indictment. Witness explained it to the people in Gaelic. He was employed by William Gordon to write Mr Young about the allotments for the tenantry. . . .”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Guelph University Archives, Urquhart-Campbell-Sutherland Papers, no. XS1 MS A003, 1844, R. Munro to James Campbell.

⁴⁶ *Disruption Worthies*, 34.

⁴⁷ E. Richards, *Clearances*, 320-21.

⁴⁸ Extract from the trial of Patrick Sellar, April 1816, in Sellar, *Evictions*, Appendix XXXVI.

In light of his employment by the estate, perhaps MacKenzie was not against the principle of estate reorganization, but rather the way in which the plans were carried out.

MacKenzie appears to provide an interesting example of the outlook of his time and station. He was attached to his people, but he could not condone resistance. In this regard, MacKenzie earned an important place in Donald MacLeod's writing for he was the pastor of MacLeod's parish and MacLeod's attacks on the perpetrators of the Clearances were not suited to non-resistance. MacLeod was brought to trial for allegations of debts owed to the estate factor and went for a certificate of character to MacKenzie who was unable at the time to write up a certificate but indicated he would do so later.

As MacLeod had to travel away from home for work, his wife was left to pick up the certificate, but in the interval MacKenzie had dinner with the factor, and Mrs MacLeod received a message from MacKenzie that "she need not take the trouble of calling for the certificate as he had changed his mind".⁴⁹ In the end, MacLeod did obtain his certificate, but only after a repeated application. On one occasion he was called "a Satan and not fit for human society".⁵⁰

In *The New Statistical Account*, MacKenzie contributed a description of his parish in which he mentioned the improvement system and commented on the hardship it created for the poor:

"... by its bearing upon the former occupiers of the soil, and by the circumstances into which it has brought their children, no friend of humanity can regard it but with the most painful feelings".⁵¹

Yet MacKenzie was accused by MacLeod of having eight families evicted from lands which he obtained in exchange for part of his glebe.⁵² Clearly, the Rev. David MacKenzie's ambiguous writings, actions and statements indicate how attitudes towards the Clearances could vary even in the case of one individual.

After the burnings his people were gone, but they were not alone in their suffering, for during MacKenzie's final days,

"... his soul was invariably impressed with a deep feeling of sadness and he was often in the habit of mediating certain passages of scripture which were descriptions of the desolation around him".⁵³

⁴⁹ D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 90.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵¹ *The New Statistical Account of Scotland*, Sutherland, parish of Tongue, 185.

⁵² D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 65.

⁵³ *Disruption Worthies*, 93-94.

Other ministers followed courses which make it hard to decide whether they were for or against the Clearances. At times they followed courses obviously to the detriment of their people, and in support of landlord policy, while at other times an opposite course was pursued. The actions of two of these ministers, William Findlater of Durness and Hugh MacKenzie of Tongue, provide interesting examples. The events which concern Findlater revolve around what has become known as the Durness Riots, which occurred during October 1841.

The riots were not particularly violent but local women did manage to deforce the officers of the estate and burn the notices of eviction which they had for delivery.⁵⁴ There was no damage to property or person. Donald MacLeod provides a background to the events which culminated in the riots.⁵⁵ The offending tacksman was Anderson of Keenabin and the parties offended were the families who had been settled on the coast after their removal from the inland glens and straths. Anderson profited from their labour through kelping and deep-sea fishing, and in the case of the fishery Anderson not only rented them equipment and bought the fish, at his own prices, but also “rented the sea to them at his pleasure”. When kelp manufacture and fishing collapsed, Anderson decided to evict them to put their holdings to better use, or in MacLeod’s words,

“... this gentleman ‘humanely’ resolved to extirpate them, root and branch, after he had sucked their blood and peeled their flesh, till nothing more could be got from them, and regardless of the misery to which he doomed them, how they might fare, or which way they were to procure a subsistence”.⁵⁶

The *Inverness Courier* carried the story entitled “Riots at Durness” and the military at Fort George was placed in readiness.⁵⁷

Of Findlater, the minister of Durness, it has been said that:

“He was very much attached to his parish . . . and expended several hundreds in trenching and fencing his glebe, which is a very large one; superintending this was his principal recreation.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The events entered the oral tradition of the area and are surprisingly expressed as a conflict between the locals of the Mackay country and the people of Sutherland: “Bha ruaig air na Cataich ’s iad fagail Duthaich Caoidh”. (The people of the Cat District were defeated as they left the MacKay Country.) Cf. MacKay, *Down Memory Lane* (Inverness, 1988).

⁵⁵ The following description is based upon D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 95-97.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁷ E. Richards, *Clearances*, 440-44.

⁵⁸ *Disruption Worthies*, 67.

In addition to his zeal for progressive agriculture, which he depended on for part of his income, Findlater was also familiar with the cultural life of his parishioners.

“He used to say that Rob Don’s songs had just done the harm to Durness which those of Burns did to Ayrshire. At the same time no-one found a higher estimate of the poet’s genius than he did.”⁵⁹

Findlater was very active in protecting his congregation from temptation regardless of the circumstances:

“On another occasion in 1846, when there was great dearth in the Highlands, on the breaking of the potato disease, a ball was proposed, the proceeds of which were to be given for the alleviation of the abounding distress. Mr Findlater, seeing the incongruity of such a proposal, wrote a long letter with some twelve reasons against it, which he sent to the gentlemen at the head of the movement. This made such an impression upon them, that although preparations for the ball were well-nigh completed, they wisely and gracefully allowed the scheme to collapse.”⁶⁰

The souls of those affluent enough to attend a ball seem to have been more important than the physical needs of the poorest of Findlater’s congregation but when the Durness Riots occurred Findlater came to the people’s aid.

“A party of soldiers was ordered to be in readiness at Fort George . . . but owing to the representation which Mr Findlater made of the people’s cause to the Edinburgh authorities, a special Commissioner was sent to Durness, and the matter amicably settled. So grateful were the people for their pastor’s interposition, that they gave a public dinner to himself and other gentlemen who had taken their side.”⁶¹

Findlater appears to have championed his people, and seems to have been successful in preventing the military from entering his parish, but the author of this particular account leaves the reader wondering how the destitute families facing eviction could have afforded to arrange a public dinner. Donald MacLeod provided details of the style with which Findlater controlled the situation which is a classic example of the use of religious doctrine during the Clearances.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

“The clergyman of this parish also made himself useful on this occasion, threatening the people with punishment here and hereafter, if they refused to bow their necks to the oppressors. According to him, all the evils inflicted upon them were ordained of God, and for their good, whereas any opposition on their part proceeded from the devil, and subjected them to just punishment here, and eternal torment hereafter.”⁶²

The Durness Riots of 1841 were a disaster for the Highlanders. An attempt at resistance had been made but the doctrine voiced by their minister and accepted by the people put a stop to any subsequent attempts. Findlater’s sermons did not denote his abandonment of the people; they were a reflection of what he, and they, thought was correct.

The attitudes of a number of other ministers are not so difficult to assess. One group was decidedly pro-landlord and pro-Clearance. A good example is the Rev. John MacKenzie of Rogart who wanted the croft of Angus Campbell in order to enlarge his glebe. The Campbell family was evicted bodily and their croft taken over.⁶³ The Rev. George Mackay of Clyne was another pro-Clearance minister. In *The New Statistical Account*, he repeatedly praised the improvement system and in his *Miscellaneous Observations* provided an apologia for the Clearances. Mackay joined the Free Church in 1843, and was later the target of the Rev. William Sutherland of the Established Church in Kildonan who, in a private letter written in 1857, accused Mackay of refusing to sign a widow’s petition for a pension, of denying charity to the poor, and of “sucking me on Sundays and Weekdays for money this last six years”. Sutherland also asked, “do you preach the Gospel better now, than you did before you left the Established Church?”⁶⁴ Perhaps animosity between the two men fired Sutherland’s accusations, but Mackay’s comments in *The New Statistical Account* make the accusations plausible.

One of the most out-spoken Highlanders of the time was the Rev. Norman Macleod (1783-1862) known as *Caraid nan Gael*, “friend of the Highlanders”. Through his ministry at St Columba’s Church, Glasgow, Macleod kept in touch with many Highlanders who had migrated to the Lowlands, and many who were in Glasgow in preparation for emigration, and he devoted most of his life to aiding his fellow Highlanders. In the 1830s he was involved in famine relief though most of his energy was

⁶² D. MacLeod, *Gloomy Memories*, 100.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 115-16.

⁶⁴ Guelph University Archives, Urquhart-Campbell-Sutherland Papers, no. XS1 MS A003, 1851 William Sutherland to George Mackay.

devoted to assisting emigration.⁶⁵ He became editor of the periodical *Cuirtear nan Gleann* (1840-1843), "Visitor to the Glens", which was founded to instruct people on emigration and his other publications included *An Teachdaire Gaelach* (1830-1832), the "Highland Messenger", and *Fear-tathaich nam Beann* (1848-1850), "Visitor to the Mountains", which also promoted emigration. Macleod did not join the Free Church.

In his statements before the Select Committee on Emigration, Macleod's views encapsulate those held by most of his profession, either Evangelical or Moderate. He combined a support of landlords' property rights and a support of the Clearances with a concern for the welfare of the Highland people, and although this latter point is not as obvious as it could be, it should be remembered that Macleod was a very popular preacher who worked to make emigration easier. The investigator's questions provide a very good sample of Macleod's views on the Clearances.

"Question 818: Is it not a known fact that in parts of the glens which were populated 15 or 16 years ago with small black cattle farms, where the patches remained green for miles, there is not now an inhabitant to be seen?

Macleod: they are not inhabited, for the proprietors could not, in my opinion, afford the system; they were obliged to adopt a different form of management, and under that necessity they removed the people to the coasts, and adopted a system of more profitable character.

Question 819: It has been stated by other witnesses that the ground will not of itself afford sufficient produce to maintain the population upon it; if the same population existed in 1745, and was kept at home by the chiefs, it must have had some means of existence; do you suppose that the ground was more capable of maintaining the population then than it is now?

Macleod: My opinion is, that if proprietors could be found to denude themselves of all rent, and to have no object but rearing human beings, the land would support the people.

Question 820: Then it is the creation of the present system of rent which has deprived the people of their means of subsistence?

Macleod: The system has changed and is changing; I think Adam Smith states that the removing of cottages and the enlarging of possessions had been forerunners of prosperity and improvement throughout Europe, and that it is the natural

⁶⁵ R. T. Cameron, "A Study of the Factors that Assisted and Directed Scottish Emigration to Upper Canada" (Glasgow Ph.D. thesis, 1970), i, 45-46.

progress of things, and I hope it may be so in the Highlands.”⁶⁶

Macleod, like William Findlater of Durness, was firmly supportive of agricultural improvement and the improvement schemes behind the Clearances. However, those same measures had resulted in a destitute population, something which the investigator called upon Macleod to explain.

“Question 822: How do you reconcile the statement that in the Highlands the raising of rent and creating large farms has improved the condition of the people, with the fact that they are in a state of starvation, which they were not in 1745?

Macleod: It has improved the condition of those who remain.

Question 823: It is said that those who remain are starving.

Macleod: Yes, because they have not removed the surplus population in those districts; the system has not been carried out, the removal of people had not corresponded with the making of large farms.

Question 824: Do you think the landlord, when he created large farms to raise his rental, should also have taken into consideration the means of removing the people or enabling them to remove themselves?

Macleod: It is not for me to say what a landlord might do, but it is most desirable that should be done, and where it is not done misery must be the consequence.”

The underlying assumptions in Macleod’s testimony are the absolute property rights of the landlords, and the value of agricultural improvement. Both are products of his time, but owing to the nature of the Committee, Macleod may have wished to emphasize the rights of property.

The Committee was created to investigate the need for emigration and to evaluate the costs involved, particularly what proportion of the cost, if any, should be borne by the landlords or the government. It is probably fair to assume that the landlords would try to reduce their part of the cost, and therefore their responsibility for the destitution of their tenants. Perhaps Macleod felt that his support for the landlords would increase their support of his emigration plans. Accordingly, his comments on landlords’ rights and their lack of responsibility for the destitution of their tenants may have been guarded.

Question 879: Do you think that if a system of emigration was to be carried into effect, the principal expense to be borne by

⁶⁶ *Report from the Select Committee on Emigration (Scotland) 1841*, British Sessional Papers, 1841, vi, 74-75.

the government, the proprietors ought to bear a certain share of the expense of removing the people?

Macleod: I do not think that the evil has been brought on by them, and I believe they can, by the common law of the land, remove the people in the same way as any proprietor in the kingdom can remove cattle or men from his estate if he thinks proper, as to their being compelled by enactment to do it, I would consider it, in the circumstances under which the population has arisen, very unfair towards them; but I know many of them would contribute.”

Macleod did not suggest that the landlords’ policy was the direct cause of Highland destitution for his views were too firmly based on property rights and agricultural improvement to have questioned it. Comparing men with cattle must surely have been an exaggeration, or an indictment of the law because too much of his life’s work was spent attempting to alleviate the destitution of his Highland countrymen to have truly believed that. Perhaps a more accurate statement of his feelings was when he wrote:

“I regret and deplore the necessity for emigration; but it is the only safety valve, if I may use that expression, for an overgrown and unemployed population. . . . To Highlanders, emigration has often been a very passion—there only refuge from starvation. Their love of country has been counterbalanced on the one hand by the lash of famine and on the other hand by the attraction of better land opening up its arms to receive them with the promise of abundance to reward their toil. . . . They have chosen, then, to emigrate; but what agonizing scenes have been witnessed on their leaving their native land.”⁶⁷

Agonizing scenes were repeated in every Highland parish for many years after Macleod had written those words, but it was not until the 1880s that Highlanders were sufficiently organized effectively to resist exploitation, but organization was not the only criterion. Somehow the bonds of loyalty they felt toward their landlords had to be broken, just as the bonds of responsibility had already been discarded by the proprietors.

Throughout the Clearances the population of the Highlands was caught between the directives of the representatives of the estates and the church. The bailiff and the minister each had his own sphere of influence and methods of compulsion. The actions of the ministers during the Clearances were just as diverse as the reactions of their congregations. Some were anti-clearance, some

⁶⁷ A. J. Beaton, *The Social and Economic Conditions of the Highlands of Scotland since 1800* (Stirling, 1906), 62-63.

were ambivalent, others supported estate plans, while others supported the need for the Clearances but regretted the amount of suffering they involved. The odium heaped on the ministers as a group was widespread and lasting, but it is questionable how much they deserved such a reputation. The rôle played by the Highland population in general was very diverse, and perhaps the actions and attitudes of the clergy were equally varied.

